OLDEST HOUSE IN MIAMI

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Color Photography By Joe Rimkus

'Oldest House' Was Built In 1866 By Homesteader William Wagner

Historic Attic In Cassell's House Has Weathered Dozens Of Hurricanes Thanks To Rugged Dade County Pine Beams.

Cassell's red Doz- Thanks County

HOUSES ARE like people. Some never show their real age.

The two story, ten-room house at 1145 NW 8th Ave. belonging to Mr. and Mrs. B. B. Cassell is such a house. It sits close to the street. Only a strip of grass separates it from the pavement. But it keeps its secret well.

To look at this house, you'd never guess that it is 96 years old. According to historical records, it is Miami's oldest residence. Built in 1868, it was just outside the first city limits, but later the property was incorporated into Miami.

Although it's alive with memories, the house is still active and useful. And this is remarkable. After all, it's watched a whole new way of life develop since William Wagner, a homesteader from South Carolina, built it soon after the Civil War.

Wagner decided to make this area his permanent home after serving as storekeeper in 1855 at Fort Dallas, one of whose buildings is also shown on this page. According to Cassell, Wagner built a house some distance from the present house in which the family lived until its destruction by a hurricane. Wagner then vowed he would construct a house the hurricanes could never blow down. Prophetically, the house has served as shelter to countless hurricane refugees through the years.

"We always ask our neighbors to stay in the house during a hurricane," Mrs. Cassell said. "Our neighbors tell us their houses shake during a storm. But this house never has."

The heavy planking used on the doors and walls was floated to Miami from Pensacola on flatbeds. The hand-hewn beams are the heart of Dade county pine. Instead of nails, wooden pegs hold the beams and planks together.

The ownership of the house passed to Wagner's daughter, Mrs. Adam C. Richards, who sold it to a real estate firm. Another daughter, Mrs. Charles C. Black, now lives on Old Cutler Road.

Like countless real estate firms to come, this company turned the area into a subdivision development, Highland Park. It was the beginning of Miami's suburbs.

A young, not-too-long married couple, the Cassells, migrated from Colorado to this area in 1909. They were the first to settle in Highland Park. Now Clara Cassell, 81, and her husband, Benjamin, 83, look back on their 54 years in this house with fondness and not a little wonder.

"This was a 160-acre dairy farm," Cassell explained. "Then it was subdivided into town lots. There was no street out there," he said, pointing toward 8th Ave. "Actually, they gave us the house if we'd move it onto the lot. We moved it about 50 feet.

"Of course we've added to the house since we bought it. When electricity was available, we had it wired. The same with the plumbing. And don't think they didn't have a time trying to bore holes in that pine."

The Cassells, parents of four children, grandparents of thirteen, great-grandparents of two, have added two baths to the original house, a kitchen, bedrooms and the porch along the front and side of the house. Cassell dug the Coral Rock himself which gives the house its attractive facade. The interior original walls of the house are covered in green burlap. Through the years the Cassells have repainted the burlap until it resembles plaster. And, according to Mrs. Cassell, is much more durable. It never cracks. The planking, once an irritation to Mrs. Cassell is now a valued treasure. Some of it serves her as beautiful topping for small tables.

Cassell, a salesman who has never retired, recalls his feelings about this area when he came.

"It seemed like I was living here for nothing," he said. "I was homesick for the mountains, and I did go back several times. But now I wouldn't live anyplace else or in any other house."

And the old house seemed to pull itself up straight on its stone foundation brought from Nassau and beam with pride at these words.